



# Helpful Hints for Better Sleep

UHN

## For patients and family members who are having trouble sleeping

This pamphlet explains:

- Types of sleeping problems
- What you can do to improve your sleep habits



## How do I know if I may have a sleeping problem?

When you are fatigued or tired, you may feel like sleeping, but have trouble actually doing so.

To find out if you may have a problem sleeping, answer these questions:

### Do you have difficulty falling asleep?

- Do you wake up at night and cannot go back to sleep?
- Do you worry about things and have trouble relaxing while in bed?
- After sleeping all night, do you wake up feeling tired and not refreshed?
- Do you wake up earlier in the morning than you would like?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, this pamphlet may be able to offer some suggestions to help you sleep better.

You can try them all, or just try one suggestion at a time. By doing so, you can tell what works best for you. Pick the suggestion that you think might help you the most, and then work through the list.

## **Talk to your doctor**

### **Some medical problems may disturb your sleep.**

Ask your doctor if:

- There are issues that may be a part of your sleeping problem, such as depression, anxiety or stress.
- Your sleeping problem may be a sign of other medical conditions.

### **Talk to your doctor about your medications.**

Some heart, blood pressure, asthma, anxiety or depression medications can affect your sleep.

- Check with your doctor or pharmacist to see if you can change when you take your medications so they are less likely to affect your sleep. For example, your doctor may suggest you take your medications in the morning instead of at night.
- Ask your doctor about any herbal or over-the-counter medications you may be taking because they may affect your sleep.

## **Tips for Better Sleep**

### **Limit the use of sleeping pills.**

Your doctor may give you sleeping pills or sedatives to help you sleep. If you do use pills, use them only for a short period and not as a long-term solution.

### **Exercise regularly.**

Regular exercise can reduce your fatigue and help you sleep better.

- Start exercising slowly, especially if you have never exercised before. For example, begin with 5 minutes of slow walking, followed by 5 minutes of brisk walking, and finish with 5 minutes of slow walking. Try walking 3 times a week.
- Slowly increase the time of each exercise session by 2 minutes every 1 or 2 weeks. Listen to your body, do not push yourself too hard. Remember that everyone is different.

- Avoid exercising 2 to 4 hours before you go to sleep at night.
- Read the “Canadian Physical Activity Guideline” pamphlet for exercise suggestions. It is available online at: [www.csep.ca/english/view.asp?x=804](http://www.csep.ca/english/view.asp?x=804)
- Be creative and think of ways to add exercise into your daily routine. For example, you can take breaks during the day to stretch or go for short 10-minute walks. You may want to have family, friends or coworkers join you to make the exercise more fun.

**If you are receiving treatment or have other health conditions (like arthritis or a heart disease)...**

You may need a special exercise program developed for you by a physiotherapist. Ask your healthcare team at Princess Margaret about programs that are available to you.

**Get some sunlight.**

Daylight is important in maintaining your sleep pattern.

- Try to get outside in natural sunlight for 30 minutes everyday.
- Remember to wear sunscreen.

**Avoid or limit drinking too much liquids or eating heavy meals 2 hours before bedtime.**

- Have a small light snack if you feel hungry, like half a cup of milk.

**Avoid or limit caffeine, nicotine and alcohol 4 to 6 hours before you go to sleep.**

Caffeine and nicotine are stimulants. This means they can increase your energy and make you more alert. Caffeine can affect you for as long as 8 hours before it fully wears off.

Before you go to sleep, try to avoid or limit:

- Food or drinks that may have caffeine in them, like coffee and tea (black, green or iced), cocoa, chocolate, and soft drinks such as colas and Mountain Dew®.
- Cigarettes and some drugs containing nicotine, like Nicorette® and Nico Derm®.
- Alcohol. It may seem helpful in the beginning as it slows down your mind, but you may wake up several times throughout the night.

**Block off some personal time to relax and clear your mind.**

- Take 30 to 45 minutes in the early evening to deal with concerns that may keep you awake at night. Use this time to problem solve, plan or address your worries.

**Do relaxation techniques.**

- Use relaxation techniques to help you relax during the day and fall asleep at night.
- Pick up a copy of the “Relaxation Techniques for Stress Relief” pamphlet (see the resources section).

**Avoid resting too much.**

- Resting too much will make your fatigue worse. You may have trouble sleeping at night if you sleep too much or are inactive all day.

**Plan your naps.**

- Take your nap before 3:00 pm if you cannot make it through the day without one.
- Keep your naps 30 to 45 minutes long. Avoid napping more than 60 minutes.

**Go to bed and wake up at the same time everyday.**

- Get up and do something boring if you do not fall asleep within 15 to 30 minutes in bed. For example, keep dull reading material close by like the manual for your refrigerator or high school textbook.
- Go outside and get some natural sunlight. This may help you wake up at the same time.

**Have a bedtime routine to help you relax and sleep.**

Your routine can include:

- Reading for a few minutes before you go to sleep.
- Listening to relaxing music.
- Doing relaxation techniques.
- Having a hot bath 90 minutes before going to sleep.

**Make sure you are comfortable.**

- Adjust your room temperature so that you feel comfortable. It may be better to keep your room a little cool and have a few blankets to keep you warm.
- Get into your favorite sleeping position, like on your back or on your side.
- Block out distracting noise and lights.
- Use thick shades to keep your bedroom completely dark.
- Avoid watching television before bedtime. It can be engaging and will keep you awake.
- Avoid using your bedroom as an office, workroom or recreation room. Use your bed for sleeping and sexual activities only. This will help your body “learn” that the bed is for sleeping.

## **Resources for More Information**

To pick up the “Relaxation Techniques for Stress Relief” pamphlet or find more information:

- Visit the Princess Margaret, Patient & Family Library (main floor)
- Go to [www.theprincessmargaret.ca](http://www.theprincessmargaret.ca)  
Click on “Patients & Families”, then click on “Patient & Family Library”,  
and search for resources

### **Canadian Sleep Society**

[www.css.to/sleep/brochures.htm](http://www.css.to/sleep/brochures.htm) - brochures\_eng

### **University of Maryland Medical Center Sleep Disorders Center**

[www.umm.edu/sleep/sleep\\_hyg.html](http://www.umm.edu/sleep/sleep_hyg.html)

### **Medline: Your Guide to Healthy Sleep**

[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sleepdisorders.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sleepdisorders.html)

### **The Sleep Well**

[www.stanford.edu/~dement/howto.html](http://www.stanford.edu/~dement/howto.html)

The development of patient education resources is supported by the Princess Margaret Cancer Foundation.